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ABSTRACT

At the middle school level, school climate, curriculum, instructional strategies, and the availability of positive adult role models all affect student performance. This study sought to determine student perceptions of discipline effectiveness, teaching strategies, and school climate. Early adolescents (N=220) between the ages of 11 and 16 in 20 middle schools were interviewed. The schools were representative of large, urban, suburban, and rural settings. Results showed a more positive picture of student perceptions of their schools than might have been expected. When asked to describe their schools, 53 percent gave positive comments, 36 percent gave negative comments, and 11 percent gave noncommital comments. Every student mentioned at least once that they would like someone to listen to them. For the most part the students who were interviewed were gregarious and talkative and needed more time to socialize than the school day allowed. Fourteen recommendations are given for middle school administrators to use in developing programs for students who cause repeated classroom disturbances and are at risk of alienating themselves from the schooling process. These recommendations range from designing an active advisory program and comprehensive curriculum to helping teachers plan for effective instruction. (ABL)

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A Middle Level
Essentials Special Paper
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Discipline and Guidance: A Thin Line in the Middle Level School

What At-Risk Students Say About Middle Level School Discipline and Teaching

Sherrel Bergmann

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Discipline and Guidance: A Thin Line in the Middle Level School

What At-Risk Students Say About Middle Level School Discipline and Teaching

AT THE MIDDLE LEVEL, school climate, curriculum, instructional strategies, and the availability of positive adult role models all affect student performance.

The home environment, teacher attitudes, and the communication system within the building can all have an impact on how much time certain students spend out of the classroom and the learning environment. In short, middle level administrators may choose to provide either a guidance/growth atmosphere or a discipline/control environment for the early adolescent.

If the principal encourages an atmosphere where every student has an adult advocate in the building, the guidance office or advisory session may become the problem-solving location in the school. Students may even develop a set of skills and appropriate behaviors through positive interaction with peers and a consistent adult (Bergmann and Baxter, 1983).

The Survey

A SURVEY WAS UNDERTAKEN to determine student perceptions of discipline effectiveness, teaching strategies, and school climate. Early adolescents between the ages of 11 and 16 in 20 middle level schools were interviewed. The schools were representative of large urban, suburban, and rural settings.

All the students were identified by the principal as "at risk" or as having frequently reported discipline problems. None of the students was from special classrooms for behavior disordered or emotionally disturbed students.

Each principal was asked to identify the 10 students most frequently sent to the office; however, some principals identified more than 10 students. A total of 154 boys and 66 girls were interviewed.

For the most part, the students who were interviewed were gregarious and talkative. They simply needed more time to socialize than the school day allowed. Many were new to their building and to the process of changing teachers for every class.

As one sixth grade female stated: "I have so many teachers with so many rules that I do the same thing all the time and sometimes I get in trouble."

Each student was asked in a personal interview to respond to the following 11 questions.

1. Tell me about your school.
2. What do you like to do in your spare time?
3. Tell me about the kind of teacher that you learn best from.
4. Have you ever been sent to the principal's or assistant principal's office?
5. Why were you sent?
6. What was your teacher doing when you were asked to leave class?
7. How did you feel about being asked to leave?
8. What is the easiest subject for you to learn and why?
9. What is the hardest subject for you to learn and why?
10. What do you think should happen to students who act out in class or break other school rules?
11. What message would you like to give teachers and principals about how to make school a terrific place to be?

The purpose of gathering student ideas was to identify any instructional strategies that might help a specific group of early adolescents stay in school and in turn, make life easier on themselves and their teachers.

The following examples, taken from actual interviews, are evidence of that thin line that separates the processes of discipline and guidance and in turn costs middle level teachers and principals months of lost learning time and creates potential at-risk students.

Tim (7th grader)

Tim is consistently 7 minutes late for his first period language arts class. He is sent to the office every day for a tardy admit slip, and usually misses a total of 15 minutes of class time by the time he returns.

When asked by the interviewer why he was consistently late he replied, "I am the oldest of five kids. My mom works the night shift and doesn't get home until after school starts. I must get my younger brothers and sisters ready for the day care program and walk three of them to the elementary school. There is no way I can drop them off and make it to this building on time, even if I run.

"My teacher says that's no excuse."

Lisa, Beth, and Joan (7th graders)

These girls are sent to the office at least once a week for talking in class. They tend to talk when the teacher is lecturing or grading papers. They are very close friends and don't seem to mind missing classes.

Hal (7th grader)

Hal feels that the school has offered him nothing but grief. His older brothers have all dropped out, as did his father. Hal feels he has a reputation to maintain as a troublemaker and vandal.

When asked why he vandalized the school and bullied younger children, Hal replied, "It's a lot more fun than sitting in class."

Amy (8th grader)

Amy is a pregnant 8th grader who has missed one third of the school year because of pregnancy-related illness. When she does come to school, she is sent to the office for not having her homework done.

Celia (6th grader)

Celia is a slightly overweight child who hates gym class. Because she hates gym, she never remembers to bring her gym suit and shoes and is, therefore, sent to the office for not dressing properly. She is failing physical education for lack of participation.

There seemed to be little relationship between these student's behavior in the classroom and the counseling process. None of the students mentioned any connection between the discipline and counseling process.

All students who were interviewed for the total study mentioned that this was the first time anyone had asked them their opinion about anything.

The students were interviewed privately and asked to check what the interviewer had written as their responses before they left the room.

Interview Results

The information from the survey paints a more positive picture of student perceptions of their schools than principals and teachers might expect. When asked in the first question to describe their school, 53 percent gave positive comments, 36 percent gave negative comments, and 11 percent were neutral or noncommital. For the most part, this group of students liked school, or at least most aspects of it.

In general conversations, the teachers of these students frequently mentioned that the students had a bad attitude toward school. The following responses, listed in order of frequency, offer a slightly more positive perspective.

When the researcher asked students to "Tell me about your school," the following responses were received:

Category of Response	*Number of Responses*
1. Teachers are nice (ok, great, good, helpful, fair, don't hold grudges, like kids, understanding, friendly).	49
I like it, it's ok (except last lunch hour), clean, safe, not great, but fun; all right; need new lockers.	49
2. It's great (fun, nice, learning a lot).	32
3. Kids aren't nice to each other.	29
4. I don't like it (hate it, jail).	26
5. I'm getting a good education here (lots to offer, learning lots).	25
6. It's boring.	22
7. It has strict rules (unfair).	21
8. Teachers are mean (not nice, not prepared, don't understand kids).	19
9. Kids are nice to each other (but 8th graders pick on 6th graders).	18
10. Teachers don't listen to students.	15
11. It's big (crowded, bigger than elementary).	14
12. The schedule affects me (lunch period, need more time to blow off energy, need more time to talk to friends, day starts too early, change classes too often, need more time between classes, the day is too long).	13
13. There are friendly people here.	9
14. Being new is very hard.	7
15. I like the facilities.	5
I like the teachers' ways of teaching.	5
I can see my friends.	5
Exploratory is great.	5

Category of Response	*Number of Responses*
16. Teachers have favorites.	4
17. It's not boring.	3
18. It's like a day at work.	2
We need more after-school sports for girls.	2
There's nothing here to inspire school spirit.	2
Teachers talk behind students' backs.	2
I like other schools better.	2
I get lots of attention.	2
The work is ok.	2
Watch out at lunch time.	2
Counselors help us.	2
Detentions don't work.	2
Lots of homework.	2
You have to be in style.	2
Lots better here than K-5.	2
You must participate in gym or get detentions.	2

In an effort to determine the level of affiliation that these students have with school activities, they were asked what they liked to do in their spare time. Many gave multiple responses, and all responses were tabulated.

While sports activities far surpassed any other activity, it was interesting to note that few of these students were involved in school sports activities. Most were involved in park district or community sports, and had lost their eligibility to play at school because of the number of detentions or suspensions they had.

The activities of these early adolescents spanned the realm of loneliness to gang-planned parties. There were no significant differences between boys' and girls' responses.

The following responses were given to the question, "What do you like to do in your spare time?"

Category of Response	*Number of Responses*
1. Play sports	111
2. Ride my bike	42
3. Be with my friends	36
4. Listen to music	20
5. Watch T.V.	16
Go to the mall shopping	16
6. Talk on the phone	14
7. Party (drink and stuff)	13
8. Fish and hunt	12
9. Read	10
10. School clubs	7
Skateboard	7
11. Not be in school activities	6
Visit my family	6
12. Take things apart to see what's inside them	5

Category of Response	*Number of Response*
Draw	5
Sleep	5
13. Dance	4
Go to my job	4
Lift weights	4
Go to movies	4
Go to the Y	4
Play	4
Skatetown	4
14. Collect things	3
Eat	3
Sit around and do nothing	3
Write notes	3
Be with my dog	3
Sing	3
15. Horseback ride	2
Computers	2
Running	2
Avoid police	2
Schoolwork	2
Homework	2
Hobbies	2
16. Go on trips	1
Shovel snow	1
Sit and think and do hair	1
Study	1
Beg for money from my parents	1
Guitar	1
Catch snakes	1
Help my mom	1
Cause trouble	1
Baby sit	1
I don't have any spare time	1

A very important component of understanding the nature of at-risk students is to discover what does work for them in the classroom. For that reason, the students were asked to describe the teacher from whom they learn best.

This was a difficult task for most. They wanted to elaborate on the horrors of the teachers from whom they learned the least.

Again, there were no significant differences between the girls' and boys' responses. Girls, in general, were far more descriptive and cited personal mannerisms more than instructional strategies.

The statements listed below offer a profile of the teacher who can best motivate those students who cause problems for other teachers. The question was, "Tell me about the kind of teacher you learn best from."

Category of Response	*Number of Responses*
1. One who has a sense of humor	54
2. Gives me help when I need it	40
Gives me extra help	
3. Understands kids and is concerned about them	24
4. Explains the subject very thoroughly	23
Helps individually	23
• at my desk	13
• walks around the room	6
• privately	4
5. One who is strict and makes you work	23
6. One who is nice	15
One who helps me with my personal problems	15
7. My math teacher	13
One who uses lots of examples and demonstrations	12
8. Gives us projects and lets us participate	11
9. One who really wants you to succeed	9
My science teacher	9
10. Goes step by step and doesn't move on until I understand it	8
11. Listens to kids	7
Keeps expectations high	7
12. One who enjoys teaching	7
One who is dramatic and active	7
One who is flexible	6
13. Social studies	5
One who tests you to see what you do know rather than what you don't know	5
One who doesn't give so much work (homework)	5
Lets us talk to our friends	5
14. One with fair rules	4
One who is always organized	4
One with patience	4
15. One who gives class time to do homework	3
One who shows mutual rapport	3
One who likes me	3
16. One who makes you feel good about learning	2
One who is smart	2
One who does things outside of class with us	2
One who talks a lot	2
Is younger	2
English	2
Rewards good behaviors	2
Tells you in advance what you are to do	2
Uses vocabulary we understand	2
Uses the overhead	2

Category of Response	*Number of Responses*
17. Writes important stuff on the board	1
Gives consequences	1
Teaches stuff we never knew before	1
Does program reports	1
Lets us chew gum	1
Where I like the subject	1
Goes over homework with us	1
Treats us like adults	1
Is cheerful	1
Tells us when we have make-up work	1
Makes us take notes	1
Acts like himself instead of a teacher	1
Tells you how, not just what to do	1
Has manners	1
Enjoys us and what we do	1
Rewards you verbally when you do something good	1
Encourages you	1
Reading	1
Spelling	1
Doesn't punish you for little things	1
Isn't boring	1
Their room is a nice place to be	1
One who leaves me alone	1
Lets us do what we want	1

Question Four, "Have you ever been sent to the principal's office from a class?" was asked to enable the researcher to classify the students as creating classroom problems rather than school problems (meaning bus, hallway, cafeteria, and other hazardous locations).

Twelve students initially said no, they had not been sent to the principal's office. They went on to say that they had been sent to the assistant principal's office but had never been to the principal's office. When asked if they had been sent to the counselor, 20 students said yes.

Students' perceptions of why they were sent to the office varied from accurate ones, to a belief that all infractions were alleged. More than 80 percent of the boys were sent for talking; 82 percent of the girls were sent for aggressive actions such as fighting, throwing things, etc. Few girls were sent for talking, and most had long records of truancy and tardiness.

Interesting questions are raised, but not answered by the students' responses to, "Why were you sent to the principal's office?"

Reason	*Number of Responses*
1. Talking	76
2. Fighting	56
3. Talking back to teacher	37
4. Goofing off	36

Reason	*Number of Responses*
5. Truancy	18
6. Skipping detention	17
7. No gymsuit	16
8. Throwing things (paper, etc.)	15
9. Tardiness	13
10. Didn't do what I was asked	10
11. Not having materials	8
12. Violent acts against others	7
(Someone else's) fault	7
13. Hallway behavior	6
14. Chewing gum	6
15. Swearing	5
Not having homework	5
Multiple offenses	5
16. Don't know	3
Not listening in class	3
Bus behavior	3
Behind in work	3
17. Writing notes	2
Drugs	2
18. Sleeping	1
Smiling	1
Stood up for a friend	1
Left my books on floor	1
Broke a pencil	1
I asked to be kicked out because the teacher called me a name	1
Had someone write a pass for me	1
Brought explosive to school	1
Let off firecrackers	1
Missed the bus	1
Drawing on chalkboard	1

While cause and effect may be implied by the responses to the next question, there was no attempt to statistically determine what strategy caused class disruption by these students. Students were very clear in their definition of the difference between lecturing and teaching.

As one student so succinctly put it, "Lecturing is when you are talking to whoever happens to be there, and teaching is when you know the students in your class and let them participate."

When asked what the teacher was doing when they were asked to leave class, the students replied as follows.

Category of Response	*Number of Responses*
1. Talking (lecturing)	49
2. Sitting at her desk	20
3. Teaching us	19
4. Correcting papers	11

Category of Response	*Number of Responses*
Work time	9
5. Was a substitute	7
6. Talking to another teacher	5
7. Yelling at me	4
8. Cutting me down	3
Talking to me	3
Writing on the board	3
Helping another student	3
9. Reviewing the test	2
Talking to other kids	2
Giving homework assignment	2
Reading out of book	2
10. Making us take notes	1
Talking about family	1
Collecting footballs	1
Being unorganized	1
Refusing to let me go to the bathroom	1
Taking attendance	1
Doing nothing	1
Doing a demonstration	1
Was out of the room	1

If teachers assume that removing a student from class causes a change in behavior in the student, the answers to the next question, "How did you feel about being asked to leave class?" may prove insightful.

Because many of these students were multiple offenders, we must assume from their responses that this type of disciplinary action is ineffective for changing their behavior. It may, however, do wonders for those students who remain in class.

How did you feel about being asked to leave class?

Response	*Number of Responses*
1. It doesn't bother me. I don't care. It feels good to leave.	65
2. It was unfair.	23
3. I planned to get kicked out.	21
4. It bothers me. I care because:	18
• trouble at home.	
• kids laugh.	
• I can't stay with my friends.	
• mom will take away basketball privileges.	
• it's not my fault.	
5. Bad (It doesn't feel good).	14
6. Fair (I deserved it).	10
7. It keeps you from learning.	9
8. Scared.	8
9. Embarrassed.	7
Mad.	7
10. It depends on what class it is.	6

Response	*Number of Responses*
11. It's fun.	4
Don't know.	4
12. Don't like it.	2
13. Guilty.	1

The disenchanted students in this study were rarely removed from their easiest class. Two students would come to school for that particular class and be truant for the rest of the day.

When asked what their easiest subject was, the following responses were given by the total group.

Response	*Number of Responses*
Math	90
English/language arts	43
Science	34
Social studies	19
Reading	15
Gym	9
Art	6
Drama	6
Speech	6
Spelling	6
Choir	4
Algebra	3
Woodworking	3
Communication arts	2
Health	2
Sewing	2
Band	1
Spanish	1
Computers	1
Civics	1
Electronics	1
Careers	1

Students were then asked why this subject was easy for them.

Response	*Number of Responses*
1. Because of the teacher.	58
2. I do well in it.	44
3. It's easy.	14
4. I like it.	13
5. The subject is interesting.	19
6. It's fun.	14
7. I like to try different things.	6
I like the kids in there.	5
It's easy to pay attention in there.	4
8. I don't know.	3
Because of the worksheets.	2
9. No homework.	1

Disenchanted students were frequently removed from or failed to attend their hardest classes. These youngsters did not seem to be able to grasp the relationship between lack of attendance and difficulty with a class.

Social studies ranked number one in hard classes for this group. Many students were adamant that there was just too much irrelevant material to learn, and that the information was taught in a boring way.

Evidence of the egocentric nature of this age group was found in the female student who said, "I'm not interested in people in China, I have enough trouble making friends here."

Another student said, "I ain't never gonna use Mesopotamia for nothin."

Other hard subjects for this group included math, science (when taught only from a textbook), and English grammar.

The following responses were received to the question, "What is the hardest subject for you to learn and why?"

Category of Response	*Number of Responses*
1. Social Studies	71
(history—12, geography—3, civics—3)	
2. Math (algebra, pre-algebra)	57
3. Science	45
Biology	10
4. English (language arts, spelling)	33
5. None	9
6. Foreign language	4
Shop	4
7. Reading	3
8. Home Economics (sewing)	3
Art	3
Study skills	2
9. Health	2
Business Enterprises	1

While the teacher made the easiest subject easy, the content was the culprit in making a subject difficult. It would seem logical that principals and teachers would assess with this group of students why they were having difficulty in their hardest class and work with them to correct the problems.

Other reasons given for the hardest subject included the following.

Category of Response	*Number of Responses*
1. The work is hard and confusing.	103
Frequent comments:	
• I don't understand it.	
• Decimals in math.	
• Vocabulary in science.	
• Grammar.	
2. The teacher's personality makes it hard for me to learn.	42
• The teacher doesn't like me.	
• The teacher makes it hard for me to learn.	

Category of Response	*Number of Responses*
3. The teacher's methods make it hard for me to learn. • Too much teacher talk. • Too many do it without telling us how. • Teachers in science and English don't explain enough.	37
4. I'm not interested in it or don't know the subject.	28
5. There's too much work (especially homework).	19
6. I'm not good at it.	16
7. It's my fault—I'm just lazy.	5

Students were then asked what they would do with students who acted out in class or frequently broke school rules. While the major response was to have someone really listen to them, most students reinforced the system that currently existed in their building, but with fairer implementation.

Responses	*Number of Responses*
1. Listen to them—ask them why they did it. Talk to them.	33
2. Give them referrals or warnings.	29
3. Give them a detention (but not for minor things like chewing gum).	25
4. Give them in-school suspension for big problems and make them work there.	22
5. Keep the same rules and do the same things you do now.	10
6. Call parents.	8
Parents should ground them.	8
Parents care more than teachers do.	8
It depends on what they have done.	8
7. Send them to the office.	7
8. Give them a Saturday detention.	5
Send them home.	5
Nothing—they are trying to liven up the classroom.	5
9. Suspend them—out of school.	4
Punish them.	4
Send them to the hall.	4
10. Ban detentions—they aren't useful.	3
11. Make them stay after school and make up class.	2
12. Stay in office for a week and do work.	2

At the end of question 10, students were told that the interview was complete unless there was something special they would like to say to teachers and principals. These may well be the most important suggestions middle level teachers and principals have heard recently.

Category of Response	*Number of Responses*
1. Listen to kids.	62
2. Make the school day shorter.	19
Everything is ok the way it is.	18
3. Be easier on us.	18

Category of Response	*Number of Responses*
4. Don't be so strict.	16
5. Don't give so much homework.	9
Go easy on kids for minor offenses.	9
Don't make me wear a gymsuit or send me to the office if I forget it.	9
6. Let us go outside for lunch.	8
Give us a chance to succeed.	8
Give us more choice in electives.	8
7. Give equal treatment (punishment for the same offense).	7
8. Get new (better, younger) teachers.	6
Get more involved with the kids (Talk to us, be there when we need you.).	6
9. Make school more fun.	5
10. Let girls have more activities (i.e., sports teams)	4
Don't repeat the same thing over and over.	4
Don't call the police when I'm not here.	4
11. Teach us in the way we learn best.	3
Give us a longer lunch period.	3
Shorten classes to 30 minutes.	3
Out of school suspension isn't fair and you don't learn anything.	3
Give us more breaks to see our friends.	3
Call home or send a note, talk to my parents about me.	3
Make passing time longer.	3
12. Be nicer.	2
Get colder water in fountains.	2
Let us chew gum.	2
Kids are just as important as adults.	2
Don't make me feel like a minority.	2
Don't let the kids run your classroom.	2
Let us wear jackets in class.	2
Make teachers follow the rules, too.	2
Put obnoxious kids near the teacher.	2
Put all of "us" on one floor in one room.	2
Let us bring skateboards to school.	2
Get rid of detentions.	2
Give more time between classes.	2
Make improvements at the beginning of year.	2
Get a new tardy policy.	2
Let us bring radios to school.	2
13. ISS is better than class.	1
Whack them.	1
Give them work detail.	1
Follow through with what you say you are going to do.	1

Category of Response	*Number of Responses*
Have them do something for the school.	1
Give them extra homework so they accomplish something.	1
Expel them for major fights.	1
Give detention for minor fights.	1
Put them in the slammer.	1
Sometimes the teacher kicks kids out because he is in a bad mood.	1
Take points off their grade.	1
Make them write 100 times.	1
Change their classes.	1
Have a class assembly, choose the baddest student in school and give them three swats—then send them all back to class.	1
Have them tell an assembly why they did it.	1
Send them to a counselor.	1
Give them a break.	1
Teach us to understand other people.	1
Don't expect more from me because I look older.	1
Don't have court hearing for tardy kids.	1
It wouldn't be a school without people like you.	1
Put radios in every room.	1
Get rid of orange/yellow lockers.	1
Give more homework.	1
Interview teachers to see who are the worst kids in the school, then get them together to see the reasons for the students' behavior.	1
Don't give us so many subjects to learn.	1
Put drug detectors by the doors and 1/2 of the school will get kicked out.	1
Get new food.	1
Most of the time it's not your fault that I'm in trouble.	1
Mind your own business.	1
Don't read to us.	1
Give us more freedom.	1
Add volleyball for sixth grade.	1
Give us more time.	1
Quit nagging more.	1
Don't call me names.	1
Have sex education.	1
Have something for us to do at lunch.	1
Don't assign seats.	1
Rules keep kids who want to participate from doing so.	1

Category of Response	*Number of Responses*
Once a sports season starts ISS should count, not before them.	1
Don't assign seats.	1
Put ninth grade in the high school.	1
Offer videos at lunch.	1
Let us make our own schedule.	1
Teachers get your number, the way you dress makes a difference in how you are treated.	1
I hate me and my life.	1
Cut out Saturday detention, it doesn't work.	1
Make recess longer.	1
Get a new vice principal.	1
Get pop machines.	1
Don't take sides.	1
Don't call my house.	1
Give us a Coke break twice a week.	1
Pay kids and they'll come to school everyday.	1
Make detention a longer time.	1
Give suspension for tardiness.	1
Don't paddle.	1
Put teachers in kids' place for a while.	1
Give two days to do homework.	1
Give kids more time to study.	1
Let students read in detention.	1
If all the kids found one teacher to be yucky, they should give her 3-14 days to improve and then fire her if she doesn't.	1
Let us eat candy.	1
Be innocent until proven guilty.	1
The school is too dark.	1

The messages from this at-risk group of students are obvious. Every student in the study mentioned at least once during the interview that they would like someone to listen to them, and their version of each incident that occurred.

If we are to keep students from becoming permanently at-risk or falling through the cracks in the system, we must devise a guidance-based discipline system that offers students an adult who knows them and can be their advocate in the building. All middle-level learners have a special need to establish positive relationships with significant other adults in and outside of the school environment.

The principals who were interviewed as part of this survey stated that few, if any, of the students who were frequently sent to the office have a positive supportive home environment. One student had moved seven times in one school year. One student only came to school after a court order was obtained. One girl was living with an older boyfriend. Several of these students had total responsibility for younger siblings before and after school.

All the girls appeared to be unkempt and physically undernourished. Several students were facing court dates on truancy and vandalism charges. In general, they seemed to lack the consistent caring of any adult.

Several boys mentioned that they purposely tried to come to the principal's office just because they needed an adult opinion. While many did not like the consequences of their behavior, they appreciated the consistency and trusted the adults to be fair.

How, then, do middle level school administrators develop programs for students who cause repeated classroom disturbances and are at risk of alienating themselves from the schooling process? The following recommendations may prove helpful.

1. Identify students who are the multiple offenders in each grade level and ask them to respond to the 11 questions plus any additional ones appropriate to your building and environment. Tabulate the results and share them with teachers.

In addition, ask all teachers to identify those students who are behaviorally at risk and tell why they think these students are having problems.

2. Identify the teachers who most frequently send these students to the office and observe their methodology. Look for too much lecture, too little attention to physical needs of students. Look for down time, poor transitions between activities, and proximity of the teacher to the students who are causing disturbances.

Does the student who frequently is removed from class sit near the teacher, far away from the teacher, or with a group who may encourage negative behavior? Are the teachers' standards realistic for the age group and the subject area? Are the teachers creating at-risk behaviors by their timing, and methodology?

A suggested reference on teacher standards is *Improving Middle School Instruction: A Research-Based Self-Assessment System*, by Reinhartz and Beach.

3. Assess the curriculum in the students' hardest subjects to see if it is age appropriate, interesting, and manageable. If a student misses three days of school, do they miss an entire concept and fall hopelessly behind? Are the textbooks written at the appropriate reading level for these students?

How are the students involved in the content? Are they passive receptors, or active investigators? Do the teachers' guides provide activities of interest to students? Is the curriculum fragmented or integrated?

For help in designing an integrated curriculum see, *A Curriculum for the Middle School Years*, by Lounsbury and Vars.

4. Ask a random sample of the students in your building who are never sent to the office these same questions and compare the results. If there are

many similarities, establish a total student survey to elucidate specific strengths and weaknesses in the middle level school (from a student perspective).

Have a selected sample of students from each grade level determine what questions should be on a student survey. Have the teachers submit questions for the survey. See the sample in Appendix A.

5. Design an active advisory program and comprehensive guidance curriculum that includes the following:

- In addition to the guidance professional, every teacher must possess basic counseling skills. Teachers are often not trained in counseling, but can be given training in listening, group dynamics, and parent conferencing. Counselors can provide inservice for teachers in developing these skills. This does not mean that the teachers become guidance experts, but that they become "sensitive to" and "aware of" guidance issues that affect this age group and some specific means of getting help for the students.
- Administrators and teachers must recognize the need for both informal and formal guidance in the middle school. All adults must be ready for the "instant crises syndrome" that invades the lives of these students. Middle schools are constantly reacting to the needs of the students. They should become active. Principals must encourage teachers to take time and teach decision making, problem solving, and responsibility as a part of the curriculum.
- Advisory sessions are a vehicle for offering positive guidance. They give students a consistent adult and peer group that meets on a regular basis to give them practice in the skills needed to cope with the issues of growing up. Therefore, time must be given during the school day for advisory groups to meet. Twenty minutes is the minimum for any advisory session. Some advisory groups meet every day; others meet twice a week.
- Teachers and all other school adults should be trained in group process skills before they become involved in a formal advisory program.
- Inservice and, if possible, retreats should be planned to help teachers prepare for the guidance program and frontline "one-to-one" counseling. Teachers, as well as students, need support in this program.
- The formal advisory program must be written as a guidance curriculum with goals, activities, and means of evaluation. It must have a definite sequence of topics and activities that are not repeated as the students progress through the grades. Many programs have one topic per month with lists of activities that advisory groups can do to discuss or develop that topic. Some programs use December and March as service project months where the students in advisory groups develop a project for others in the school or community.
- Health information must be available to every student. Every teacher should be aware of the health needs and physical development processes of

young adolescents. Many of the guidance issues will be related to the health issues of the students. Topics such as alcohol, drugs, sex, and disease are frequently on the minds of the middle level student.

- The guidance model should permeate the regular curriculum. Content area discussions and assignments can take on a much needed guidance focus if teachers are aware of the issues. For example, looking at decisions made in history or by characters in classic literature can help students develop a sensitivity to how adults make decisions and the steps that are needed. Science is full of guidance issues that will affect the future lives of today's middle schoolers.
- Parents should be informed about the guidance program and invited to participate in discussions with teachers and students on topics related to communication and tough issues such as drugs or sex. Parent education programs can also focus on guidance issues and be led by counselors and teachers.

6. Establish a discipline program that has a few clear rules with the consequences for infraction clearly stated and uniformly enforced (Gnagey, 1981). Most discipline programs are based on the need for respect for people, time, and environment. What may be missing is respect for self and lessons on appropriate behavior.

7. Plan a series of staff development sessions to formulate a mission statement for guidance-based discipline. Begin this process by having the staff members answer the following 10 questions in small groups.

- What is your bottom line? What attitudes, concepts, and skills do kids who attend your school get by the time they leave the eighth grade?
- How many of your staff members can articulate this bottom line to kids, to parents, to the community, and to each other?
- How many teachers know what others are trying to accomplish on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis? How many care? The miniature high school model of departmentalization does not facilitate faculty communication for the benefit of the students. It does not help teachers understand and respect each other's efforts, either.
- How many teachers respect what other staff members are trying to accomplish and portray that respect through verbal support? How many principals know, respect, and verbalize that respect for teachers? What are we like as role models for the students?
- How many teachers can list the three jobs that consume most of the time of the building principal? As the research indicates, effective principals must be the instructional leader in a building. It becomes difficult to do that if teachers constantly send youngsters who commit minor infractions to the office for discipline.
- How is guidance implemented in your school? Do any youngsters fall

through the cracks? Do you leave it up to the counselors and social workers to work with at-risk students?

- How do the students feel about being a part of your school? Are there differences between grade levels?
- How does your community view your middle school?
- How do you promote what your school does? Do you use the statistics gathered by the central office in a positive way? Can you send home a newsletter that says that 99 percent of the youngsters in your school were not sent to the office that week, or that 90 percent of them are reading at grade level or above?
- What kind of goals do you have for the next five years?

Examine both the discipline and guidance programs based on the staff's answers to the 10 questions.

8. Establish a steering committee to explore models of guidance-based discipline. (See NASSP's *Agenda for Excellence at the Middle Level*, and *Developing a Mission Statement for the Middle Level School*.)

9. Keep track for one month of the amount of learning time lost by students who are sent to the office. Report the findings to the teachers.

Principals of schools in the study stated that the average amount of time spent with each of these students was six hours. Using that as a bottom line figure, this entire group of students lost 55 days, 11 weeks, or two and three-fourths months of instructional time. This does not include time that these students spent in after-school detention or suspension.

10. Help teachers plan for effective instruction. Offer them effective management strategies that will minimize disruptions. (For a thorough review of research see, *What Research Says to the Middle Level Practitioner*, by Johnston and Markle.)

11. Review the research on classroom management and study models such as reality therapy, developed and researched by William Glasser (1977). Glasser's program requires the teacher to help the student assess his or her own behavior, listen to them, determine the appropriateness, and plan corrective strategies. Most of the students in this study recommended these steps without ever having heard of reality therapy. Glasser's own studies indicate that use of his system can result in fewer office referrals, fewer fights, and fewer suspensions.

12. Assist parents in the development of positive links with the school. Parents of the students most frequently sent to the office usually receive only negative messages from the school. These parents may have given up on their kids and need to understand how to cope and discipline them themselves.

Counselors and advisers can provide parents with information vital to understanding the characteristics of the early adolescent. (For an example of a successful parent education program, see, *Parent-Student Communication: A Middle Level School Challenge*, by Bergmann and Creighton.)

13. Inherent in this study is the knowledge that some students must be removed from classrooms they disrupt. When teachers work in teams, they can share their perceptions of student behavior and strategies for effective coping or behavior change. Teams can identify guidance/discipline problems and develop a consistent plan of action with the student.

14. Identify ways to help these students be successful in school (Purkey and Novak, 1984; Beane and Lipka, 1987).

This study offers a simple start for schools that face large numbers of office referrals. The process is a basic one—ask the students who are affected. Ask the teachers to discuss guidance and discipline and develop a model for guidance-based discipline.

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Appendix — Discipline Survey

Directions: Select only one response for each question. Ask your teacher for help if you don't understand the question.

Current Student Survey

Key — SD = Strongly Disagree; D = Disagree; N = No opinion; A = Agree; SA = Strongly Agree

1. Grade Level, 5 _____ 6 _____ 7 _____ 8 _____
2. Sex, M _____ F _____
3. Age, 10 _____ 11 _____ 12 _____ 13 _____ 14 _____

Discipline Survey

4. I know how my teachers expect me to act.	SD	D	N	A	SA
5. I know what will happen if I don't behave properly.	SD	D	N	A	SA
6. Most of my teachers have fair rules and guidelines.	SD	D	N	A	SA
7. Our school teaches us to be responsible for our actions.	SD	D	N	A	SA
8. Students in our school respect each other.	SD	D	N	A	SA
9. Discipline at our school is: A. Too strict B. Just right C. Not strict enough			A	B	C
10. I feel safe at this school.	SD	D	N	A	SA
11. The students in my class behave in such a way that I can learn.	SD	D	N	A	SA
12. I feel that what I'm learning at this school is appropriate for my age group.	SD	D	N	A	SA
13. Suspension from school is appropriate for students who break important rules.	SD	D	N	A	SA
Students should be suspended from school for:					
14. Damaging property	SD	D	N	A	SA
15. Injuring another person	SD	D	N	A	SA
16. Truancy	SD	D	N	A	SA
17. Having or using alcohol, drugs, or cigarettes.	SD	D	N	A	SA
18. Too much teasing (harassment) of others.	SD	D	N	A	SA
19. I would rather be kept in school but not attend classes than be suspended and sent home for the day.	SD	D	N	A	SA
I feel the following are serious problems among students at our school:					
20. Drug use	SD	D	N	A	SA
21. Alcohol	SD	D	N	A	SA
22. Cigarettes (smoking)	SD	D	N	A	SA
23. Sexual behavior	SD	D	N	A	SA
24. Vandalism — destruction or theft	SD	D	N	A	SA

25.	I feel that there is at least one adult in school who will listen to me if I have problems.	SD D N A SA
26.	The teachers are concerned about me as a person, not just how good a student I am.	SD D N A SA
27.	I generally feel happy at school.	SD D N A SA
28.	I feel I can get help from teachers to make better decisions about my life.	SD D N A SA
29.	I feel it's OK to talk to teachers about my problems.	SD D N A SA
30.	I can solve my own problems most of the time.	SD D N A SA
31.	I believe there is at least one teacher in this school who knows me well.	SD D N A SA
32.	It is easy for me to get help with my problems at school.	SD D N A SA
33.	I believe that I have learned to deal with some of my problems better because of what I have learned in school.	SD D N A SA
34.	Some of my classwork has helped me to understand myself better.	SD D N A SA
35.	Some of my classes have helped me to get along better with other people.	SD D N A SA
36.	I feel that my parents and the school are working together to help me.	SD D N A SA
37.	I have someone at home to talk to if I have a problem.	SD D N A SA
38.	If I ask my teachers, they are willing to give me individual help outside of class time.	SD D N A SA
39.	I get along well with people who are different from me.	SD D N A SA
40.	I am more able to understand how to get along with others than when I first entered this school.	SD D N A SA
41.	I believe that my experiences at this school are helping me to understand why people act the way they do.	SD D N A SA
42.	When I have a complaint or problem, I go to: A. Teacher B. Social Worker C. Nurse D. Principal E. Another Student.	A B C D E
43.	In school, I usually do my best.	SD D N A SA
44.	My teachers make sure I understand what they teach in class.	SD D N A SA
45.	Regardless of my grades, I'm learning a lot this year.	SD D N A SA

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